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ABSTRACT

Today's educational reform proposals are undermined by four dilemmas. First, the public may demand visible results before it will provide the funding needed to achieve them. Second, higher academic standards will increase failure rates, while more attainable standards will inadequately educate students. Third, the current focus on high schools may detract from improvements still needed at other levels. Fourth, to say that public schools have "failed" may lower teacher morale and public support, yet not to do so ignores problems that must be solved. These dilemmas arise from a faulty assumption that improving school services automatically improves learning; reformers overlook the relationship between students and services. A new model is needed--an "educational partnership" in which home, school, and community share the responsibility for education and in which school services are but means to the end of learning. This model can solve the above four dilemmas as follows: (1) by redirecting energy from placing blame to constructive collaboration; (2) by stimulating improvement at all educational levels; (3) by providing help for students with difficulties; and (4) by requiring very little money to start. Once partnership is established, the community will be willing to fund needed services. This approach, though it is no panacea and must overcome bureaucratic inertia, offers a real chance of success. (MCG)

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EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP AND THE DILEMMAS OF SCHOOL REFORM

by

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Staten Island, NY

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The main message of my talk today, to paraphrase from the agenda for tomorrow morning, is that we can't "get there from here" by the route we are taking. "There," of course, is the educational "excellence" everyone is looking for--or, to use the theme of this conference, "the educated person" we hope all students will become. "Here" is the present situation in our schools. The "route we are taking" is what I want to talk about---together with an alternate route I think has a better chance of getting us to our destination.

People, of course, differ on the definition of "excellence" and on the present situation in our schools. But I will not dwell on these differences. There is enough consensus on these points for me to restate my proposition as follows: We are not going to reach the levels of educational achievement needed in today's world by the approaches we are taking. The main problem is not the goals we want to reach, but the route we are taking to get there.

This does not mean I am opposed to reforms proposed in the flood of recent commission reports. By and large they point to important and desirable changes. And no doubt some good will come from them. Indeed, some good is already coming from them, as state and local school systems tighten their standards and improve their programs. The problem is that the reform agendas now being laid out tend to leave out a key ingredient necessary to produce "the educated person" we are looking for. Proceeding down our present path, therefore, is likely to lead once again to disappointment and frustration--frustration that we can ill-afford, for as more than one commentator has pointed out, we may not get another chance to reform public education in this century--or perhaps ever, if public confidence resumes its downward slide and people begin to turn to alternatives such as vouchers or tuition tax credits.

Many people worry "whether anything will happen" as a result of the "salvo of reports" that have been shot into the political arena in recent months.[1] Some of the worries take the form of dilemmas that confront us as we try to move from high-flown proposal to practical implementation.

The first dilemma relates to that persistent reality, money. The hearings held in recent weeks on the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education have brought forth anguished questions about who is going to pay the "hefty price tag" for implementing the Commission's recommendations.[2] The federal government has made clear

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that it won't, and many state and local school systems say they can't. I have no doubt that in this richest of all lands, we certainly can afford to pay whatever it takes to educate our children. But being able to afford it does not mean that taxpayers will necessarily appropriate the money. Although public opinion polls say the public is willing to spend money for quality education, in practice taxpayers are skeptical whether increased spending will bring the results they want. They have been told too many times before--"Increase our spending and we'll produce better education for you"--only to be disappointed. It will not be easy to go back to the well again--at least not for the amounts now being talked about. School districts and states that have fallen severely behind may be able to recoup some of their losses, and states with activist governors will make some gains, but the increased billions needed to carry out the new proposed reforms are going to be hard to come by until we reverse the public's skepticism and lack of confidence in school reform.

We are confronted therefore with a serious dilemma: In order to get more money, we need to show the public we can improve the schools; but in order to improve the schools, we seem to need more money. The reverse side of the money dilemma is even more grizzly: Where public dissatisfaction causes cuts in funds--or, what amounts to the same thing, failure to keep up with inflation--school systems begin to see their programs erode, leading to even more public dissatisfaction and potential further loss of funds. Talk about "excellence" and "the educated person" can ring hollow in school systems caught in this kind of downward spiral of confidence and quality.

As a result of these money problems, the vice-president of a local school board at one of the hearings on the Excellence report said, "The ideas are good, but are they practical?"[3] We must ask the reverse question: If the ideas are not practical, how can they be good? I believe there are ways out of the money dilemma, but going to the public once again with expensive packages of "new and improved" educational services has serious problems.

A second dilemma I will call "Down's Dilemma," because Graham Down of the Council for Basic Education stated it so well in a recent speech at the National Press Club. Yet it is an old and familiar dilemma for those who strive for "the educated person" in our public schools: "If virtually all students are mandated into courses in math and science that are designed solely for well prepared students, we are likely to produce a soaring failure rate and an increase in school dropouts. On the other hand, if courses are watered down to produce a politically acceptable graduation rate, students from all parts of society will be cheated."[4]

Yes, by all means, we must raise our standards, but if we do not find ways to make sure that students meet the higher expectations, the standards will not hold. And does anyone believe we are close to ensuring such a result? A recent study by the National Center for Educational Statistics found that less than 3% of our most recent

graduating class met the requirements recommended by the Excellence Commission.[5] That means that even the vast majority of college-bound students fail to meet the desired standards, let alone those not going to college, and not even to mention those who have already dropped out before they reach their senior year.

We have not faced the fact that "standards" in the current context have a revolutionary new meaning. In the past they were a way to screen people out. Now they must ensure an adequate level of education for all. "The educated person" can no longer be a term that applies only to a small elite. Nor can we get away with the deception that "the education person" means a person who has finished school. Whatever else it might mean, it certainly must mean at least that the person is literate and has enough of the tools of learning and background in the arts and sciences of human culture to be able to continue learning throughout life. That is what we have to mean if the call for all students to take "four years of English," "three years of mathematics," "three years of science," etc.,[6] is to be anything other than a sham. Despite all the good will and excellent ideas contained in recent commission reports, they fall short of showing the way we can achieve this necessary result. But if we fail to achieve it, all the talk of raised standards will turn to dust, for the reality of masses of uneducated youth will force standards to be kept at so-called "realistic" levels which most students will meet.

A third dilemma is where to begin. Most of the current reform reports focus on the high schools, presumably on the ground that, as one analysis put it, there is a consensus among the reform commissions that there have been "significant improvements" in the lower grades,[7] and now the high schools "should be the focus of reforms." Yet anyone seriously interested in educational excellence must be aware that we still fall far short of providing the kind of base in elementary school that would lead to excellence in the high school.

In response to this dilemma, a group of educational leaders recently met in Racine, Wisconsin, and were told that elementary schools were not left out of recent reports because they are unimportant but "because it was time to turn the focus away from elementary education."[8] Why, one must ask, is it "time to turn the focus away from elementary education"?

There is in this shift of attention from elementary to high school the distinct whiff of reform faddism. Does the fact that "[i]n the past 25 years, much time, research and money have gone into elementary education,"[9] as one participant in the Racine meeting pointed out in explaining the high school focus, mean that we have come close to solving the problems of the earlier grades? Will we, after spending additional frustrating years trying to reform the high schools, then turn our attention back to the elementary schools? This may be a good way to sustain the education reform industry, but it will not meet the needs of the day for educational excellence.

Dean Evans of the Lilly Endowment, in responding to this dilemma about where to begin, told the Indiana Congress on Education that, "We Must Begin Every Place At Once." In a certain sense, I agree with him, as we shall see. But if we try to "begin every place at once" through the usual approach of improving and expanding services, we will run right back into the money dilemma. As Michael Kirst, former President of the California State Board of Education, has said, we are in "a period of fiscal stringency," in which "limited resources necessarily concentrate reform on parts of the whole." "Hard times," he says, "force choices among programs."[10] It is not possible, therefore, to "begin every place at once" with our usual approach of improved and expanded services.

This leads me to the last dilemma I want to mention before suggesting a different approach. The Commission on Excellence, in trying to arouse the public as to the urgency of the situation, spoke of "A Nation at Risk," a "rising tide of mediocrity," "unilateral educational disarmament," and "the imperative for educational reform." While the Commission members came from different backgrounds and perspectives, their examination of our schools left them alarmed by what they found, despite 25 years and billions of dollars of earnest reform efforts. Based on what they found the Commission tried to arouse the American public to the dangers of our educational failures. Ah, but there's the rub! That word "failure"—and anything that implies failiure—is a problem. Educators hear it as one more unfair attack by an unappreciative public. The public hears it is an unwelcome reminder of priorities unattended to. Conscientious school board members are concerned its mention will lower teacher morale and dampen public support for the schools.

So there is a public relations and political strategy dilemma: If we talk of failure, we may only contribute to the downward spiral. If we don't talk of failure by some means or other, how will we ever generate the motivation to change? If there is no serious gap between what we are achieving and what we need to achieve, why the need for reform? If there is such a gap, how can we prevent people from seeing it as in some sense a "failure"? Even Ernest Boyer's report, which has been described as providing a "more upbeat appraisal of American education than other recent studies," speaks of "an alarming gap between school achievement and the task to be accomplished," of a "failure to educate every young person to his or her full potiential" which "threatens the national social and economic health," and "a deep erosion of confidence in our schools."[11]

I fear there are already signs that the educational establishment is responding to this dilemma, perhaps unconsciously, by reducing the sense of urgency. We are told that all these urgent national reports are only a "postscript"; the reforms are already well underway.[12] We are told that instead of a "rising tide of mediocrity," we have a "rising tide of school reports."[13] Don't "panic" seems to be the message: We still have the best school system in the world, and whatever reforms are needed are now in the expert hands of educators. If you just give us

the money and support we need, the job will be done.

But will the job be done? I don't know of any reform commission or responsible individual who recommends "panic," but we must be concerned that so many reform efforts in the past have come and gone without "getting the job done." As one educator put it, after the flurry of press attention, "Soon it's all forgotten, and those in the schools are left to cope with the same problems as before,"[14] and I might add, the public is left to cope with the same unsatisfactory results as before. If we do not learn from our past failures, we will be doomed to repeat them, to paraphrase the famous quote. I am convinced that the job will not be done, and cannot be done, so long as we approach educational reform as in the past. And I very much fear that the current reform movement is starting to flow once again into the well worn paths that have led to frustration in the past.

What are these paths? They are the paths of "school improvement." "School improvement" is touted as a new reform movement, but in fact nearly all of the efforts we have made in recent decades, and are recommending today, have been part of this same basic strategy. The assumption seems to be that if children are not learning enough, the thing to do is to improve school services. There may be variations in how to improve school services, and attention may swing, as we have seen, from one area of the curriculum or school organization to another. The current reports take some new twists, such as merit pay or expanding the school year, but they are still within the same framework of expanding or improving school services.

Now, admittedly this seems only like obvious common sense—so much so, in fact, that we take this basic approach for granted. Our present policy framework provides little alternative. The flaw with this approach, however, is that in many schools the underlying problem is not the services themselves, but the relationship between the services and the students. The services may be offered—often at great effort and expense—but the students do not learn. And the students don't learn because they are not "tuned in" to the school and what it is about. The improved services give the illusion of reform, because they can be pointed to as something we have done to "improve the schools," but too often they do not deal with the basic problems of relationship, and therefore do not produce the "excellence" or "the educated person" we are looking for.

What appears to be common sense, in other words, can be deceptive, as it was for all those people (that is, nearly everyone) who assumed that the world was flat, because it seemed so obvious that it was, before we began to look at the world in a different way. I am asking us to look at school reform in a different way.

It is not that we do not need to improve school services. Many improvements are needed, and will have to be part of a successful reform strategy. But the approach to school reform I am proposing asks us to make sure that the changes and improvements be designed and implemented

always to accomplish one goal above all others: namely productive learning relationships. It is not enough that we get what seem to be "better services"— whether it be better curriculum, better teachers, better buildings, better equipment, or whatever — unless these services produce successful learning relationships between teachers and students.

This also may seem obvious, but we must face the fact that many reforms have been instituted, and much money spent, without insuring this result—often without even trying to insure this result. Public school systems, like so many institutions that persist over time, suffer from something the scholars call "goal displacement." In the case of school systems the displacement takes the form of substituting educational services for learning as the goal of the institution. Educational services are easier to define, easier to control bureaucratically, and easier to be held accountable for. Learning is hard to define and harder to control or be held accountable for. One of the reasons for this is that learning is ultimately produced not by the school and the teachers, but by the students--by work they do in their own heads--and students tend not even to be seen as an organic part of school systems, but as their "clients," or the "targets" of their services. Students—and thus learning—are therefore often left out of the equation, even while school services are expanded and improved.

It is, of course, assumed that educational services will produce learning, but that is just the problem: It is assumed, but when we look more closely we find that it is all too often not the case. We must therefore redirect our attention, make learning clearly our goal, and recognize that the student, not the teacher or the school, is the prime producer of what we want. When we do this we will recognize that it is not services as such that we are after, but the relationship between the services and the students. We will also see that students relate to schools not as isolated individuals, but as members of families, peer groups, and communities. Productive educational relationships, therefore, must take into account a variety of relationships if we want to be successful.

I call this approach to education "educational partnership" to distinguish it from the currently prevailing "service delivery" approach to education. Another way of looking at it is as an alternative policy framework for education. Our present policy framework is based on the concepts of delegation and political accountability: We have "delegated" education to a government agency, and we hold the agency "accountable" through the political process for "delivering" education to our children. Under such a framework, it is almost inevitable that "education" will be defined as "educational services." They are the only things that schools, as government agencies, can "deliver" and be held accountable for. In the partnership model, education is not delegated to the government, but is seen as a shared responsibility of home, school, and community. School services are provided to help with the process, but they can never become, in themselves, the goal of the enterprise. They are designed and evaluated solely in terms of how well

they contribute to the learning process.

How can the partnership approach help us with the dilemmas discussed earlier? Perhaps in discussing how the partnership approach would deal with some of our current policy problems, we can come to understand it better. Let us take our dilemmas in reverse order, starting with the problem of "failure."

One of the reasons we shy away from talking of failure in our schools is that, under our current policy framework, any mention failure immediately raises the issue of who to blame. Under the service delivery model it is almost inevitable that we will get just what we now have: Everyone blames everyone else. The public blames the schools for delivering shoddy services. The schools blame the public for not putting up enough money for better services. Parents blame teachers for poor teaching, and teachers blame parents for poor parenting. Everyone can feel satisfied they have found the proper party to blame, but the job will not get done. We are caught in a paralysis of mutual blame-placing.

Under the partnership model, we can talk constructively about how we have failed in the past and how we can work together in the future. There is no need to waste time and energy on who to blame; we all share responsibility for maintaining an approach that hasn't worked, and we can all work together to fashion a new collaborative approach that has a better chance of working. This not only provides a better political context, but also brings us closer to the true nature of the problem. Relationships always involve two or more sides; if we have to improve the relationships it will take everyone's efforts to do it. Both teachers and parents will have to work harder in motivating students, and communities will have to work harder to create the "learning society" the Excellence Commission calls for. Students themselves will have to work harder, as the prime producers of learning. And everyone will have to work at relating their efforts to each other so that there is a true sense of partnership. This will take a lot of changing of attitudes and habits, but it is absolutely "doable," once we see that it is the path to "excellence" and "the educated person."

How will partnership help us with "where to start"? As Dean Evans said, "we must begin every place at once." and yet, as Michael Kirst reminds us, there is no possible way we can improve services every place at once. Educational partnership, however, can in a sense be started every place at once. It primarily requires a change of attitude and approach, and it can be most successfully implemented as a district or community-wide--or even state-wide--change in approach. The actual changes in program and practice have to be phased in gradually as plans are developed and staff, parents, students and community are reoriented to the new approach, but the <u>spirit</u> of a new collaborative approach can begin to affect a district or state across the board, and generate confidence that the job can, indeed, be done.

This brings us to "Down's dilemma," which is the really tough one for

American education. We are finally talking seriously about making everyone an "educated person," but if we don't find a way of actually achieving this result, the new standards will either be a crueler form of screening and pushing people out of educational opportunities, or they will be rescinded or watered down in the name of "realism." Neither result is acceptable, but one or the other is inevitable if we don't accomplish what seems to many people only a visionary pipe dream--and certainly beyond the reach of our public schools as they now operate.

Yet it is goal that <u>can</u> and indeed must be achieved if the present reform movement is not to collapse from the weight of its own rhetoric, and send us once again on a spiral of declining confidence in public education. How can we possibly achieve it? I will give you a modest example of how I think it can be done: In New York as few years ago when the new state competency requirements for high school graduation were just going into effect, the school system announced that there were 7000 high school seniors who would be denied diplomas because they had not been able to pass the test. The whole idea for such tests were under attack because many felt, as one principal said, "To educate everybody is an impossible goal. Some will never learn how to read and write no matter what you do." It was viewed as just one more cruelty to hold out expectations and requirements for children that could not be met. Some of us who believed in educability of all children, however, organized an emergency tutoring project in cooperation with the School Volunteer Program, and in six weeks of tutoring 90% of the 400 students we tutored passed the test. (Most of the rest of the students were found to be ineligible for graduation because they lacked the necessary course credits.) Our success came not because the tutors were more skillful than the classroom teachers, for I am sure that most of them could not have managed a regular class. Rather, they brought two factors which regular teachers usually can't supply: One is very tangible--the personal attention, care and encouragement of a one-to-one relationship. The other is more symbolic, but perhaps equally important for the success of the partnership approach--namely, the message that a broader community cares about the success of every student--expects them to succeed and will help them succeed.

I mention this as a "modest" example, because the standard to which we were helping to bring these students was itself modest--probably only about a sixth grade level of reading and math. And yet I can say from the personal experience of having tutored one of these hapless seniors, and from talking to other tutors who had similar experience, that these students were eminently educable. We could only wonder in anguish what could have been achieved if the personal help and community encouragement that helped these students succeed had been provided back in elementary school so that they would not have suffered through so many years of barren and failure-filled schooling.

There are, of course, many examples in school systems across the country where such help is provided--and early enough to help students reach far higher levels of educational excellence as they proceed with their schooling. Many school systems, for instance, now have excellent

school volunteer programs. But volunteer tutoring by adults is by no means the only technique that can help to bring success where failure otherwise seems inevitable. Peer tutoring, cooperative student-team learning, and student-teacher joint learning agreements, are approaches that, as Prof. Herbert Walberg points out in this month's Educational Leadership magazine, have been shown to be effective.[15] Other devices, such as the redesigned parent-teacher conferences used in Houston, Indianapolis, and here in New Orleans, or the mobilization of parent and community resources, such as in Atlanta, all have helped teachers, parents, and citizens work together to assure student success. Superintendent Billy Reagan of Houston, with his Operation Fail-Safe, has been campaigning now for several years on the theme that "parents and teachers must be partners in a child's education."

Some states have also begun to encourage this kind of collaborative approach. Utah has held a series of workshops to promote "Home-School-Community Partnership" and to help both school people and citizens realize the importance of involving "parents and the community at large" in students' learning. Alaska sent materials to local school systems pointing out that in "effective schools, everyone works together to get the job done. Students, staff and parents take part . . . Learning takes teamwork." The New York State Board of Regents is developing a plan to promote school-community partnerships throughout the state.

But these examples are far too rare. They represent a growing movement across the country but the movement is still little more than a small counter-current to the mainstream of educational policy and practice, which is still focused primarily on expanding and improving school services without regard to their productive relationship with parents, community, and, most important, the students themselves. There are a few things said about the importance of parent and student involvement in some of the recent reform reports, but they are given little emphasis and have received almost no attention in the press. A summary of three of the major reports prepared by Phi Delta Kappa has only this to say about the importance of parents: "The Commission calls upon educators, parents, and public officials at all levels to assist in bringing about the reforms proposed in this report." That is all there is in 11 pages of recommendations and proposals.

Educational partnership is either taken for granted or given scant attention as a nice, but relatively unimportant part of our educational systems. I am convinced, however, that if we take it seriously, it can be the secret weapon that can help us win the war on ignorance--or, to use the metaphor of the Commission on Excellence, that can help us overcome our "unilateral educational disarmament." Few school districts have even begun to mobilize the resources and community will-power that could be enlisted to ensure educational success for our children. When they do, I think we will begin to see levels of educational achievement that have until now indeed seemed like impractical pipe dreams.

Once we escape from our unexamined assumption that educational

services, by themselves, can educate children, we can put ourselves in a position to escape from Down's Dilemma. We can set high standards, and then realistically work to make sure students achieve them.

What about money—our first dilemma? One of the virtues of the partnership approach is that it can be begun with very little money. In many cases already available resources can be used in different ways to bring about collaborative efforts, with the various parties working together to achieve common objectives. Modest resources are needed to facilitate the collaborative process—to get people together to recognize their common goals and develop the trust needed to work together in achieving them. Some resources are also needed to facilitate programs like peer tutoring and school volunteers, but they are again modest in comparison to the increased common effort they can produce. When, in the course of working together on such collaborative efforts, it becomes clear that other improvements are needed that cost more money, such as smaller class size, better counseling services, or improved teacher salaries, the partnership spirit can help to create the climate within which the community will be willing to pay the increased costs.

Educational partnership is obviously not a panacea—nothing is. It will take a great deal of effort to make the many improvements needed in education. But partnership provides a way to work at these improvements that has a chance of success, while merely focusing on improved services and standards, no matter how wonderful they may appear, is, in my opinion, doomed to failure.

Don't be deceived. Partnership is not as easy as it might seem. It will take changes in outlook, priorities, and operation. But lest I leave you with too narrow a path leading to the promised goal, let me suggest that there are two factors in the current situation that increase the chances for winning the battle of school reform this time around. One is the involvement of state governors on a scale unprecedented in the past. This may entail some dangers of unwelcome political interference, but a governor has the capacity to help mobilize support for the partnership approach which local school officials may find difficult by themselves. State boards of education are in a pivotal position to exercise leadership on behalf of educational partnership, and if they can persuade their state governors to work with them in changing the approach to educational reform, the combination should be powerful. The fact that partnership is the opposite of state bureaucratic control should make it attractive to governors who want to exercise educational leadership without violating local control or involving themselves in the intricacies of pedagogy and curriculum.

The second positive factor is the current emphasis on educational outcomes, or results. It is harder to confuse educational services with true learning goals in the face of persistent demands for increased educational achievement. An outcomes approach to education and educational partnership go hand in hand, because the demand for outcomes provides the motivation to move beyond inadequate approaches of the

past, and partnership provides the way in which the outcomes can be achieved. Furthermore, partnership can help keep the focus on real learning as a form of personal empowerment, rather than merely statistical test scores, which, as we have learned, can sometimes only involve mechanical skills. Like the involvement of governors, persistent demands for improved learning outcomes can be annoying, but, once we are driving down the right road, which I am convinced is the partnership road, demands such as yours at this conference for "the educated person," can provide the engine to drive us to our destination.

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1. Fred Hechinger, "But Will Anything Come of All Those Reports," New York Times, October 4, 1983, p. C-8

2. Education Week, September 28, 1983, p. 1.

3. Education Week, 9/28, p 15.

4. Education Times, 9/26/83, p. 2

5. Education Week, 9/28,83, p. 12

6. National Commission on Excellence in Education, Recommendation A.

7. New York Times, 9/18/83, p. 20E

8. Education USA, 9/26/83, p. 25.

9. Education USA, 9/26/83, p. 25.

10. Phi Delta Kappan, September, 1982

11. New York Times, 9/16/83, p. A-1, A-13.

12. Education USA, 9/5/83, p. 1. See also Boyer interview, Education Week, 9/21/83, p. 15.

13. New York Times, 9/18/83, p 20, (Fiske quoting Boyer)

14. Albert Shanker, "Where We Stand," advertisement in New York Times, September 11, 1983, p. E9.

15. Educational Leadership, October, 1983, p.6.